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ABSTRACT

This study examined the social interactions and emotional adjustment of 21 preschool children of battered women and 25 same-age children from nonviolent homes. Mothers rated the frequency of their emotional and physical abuse during the past year, their mental health, parenting qualities, and their child's adjustment. Two observers evaluated the free play of each child in a small group setting on three separate occasions. Levels of emotional expression and emotion regulation were also assessed. Results indicated that children who witnessed parental violence had many more behavioral problems, exhibited significantly more negative affect, responded less appropriately to situations, were more aggressive with peers, and had more ambivalent relationships with their caregivers than children from comparison families. However, they were no less happy in play than their peers and were equally likely to engage in mutual play, cooperative play, sharing and taking turns, and joining in play with others. Regression analyses showed that emotional abuse of the mother and mother's self-esteem were the most significant predictors of the child's adjustment and social behavior. (Author/KDFB)

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The Social Functioning of Preschool-Age Children whose Mothers are Emotionally and Physically Abused

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ABSTRACT

The social interactions and emotional adjustment of 21 preschool children of battered women and 25 same-age children from nonviolent homes were assessed. Mothers rated the frequency of emotional and physical abuse during the past year, their mental health, parenting qualities, and the child's adjustment. The free play of each child in a small group setting was evaluated by two observers on three separate occasions. Levels of emotion expression and emotion regulation, interaction with peers and caregivers, and the observers' feelings about the child were assessed. Children who witnessed parental violence had many more behavioral problems, exhibited significantly more negative affect, responded less appropriately to situations, were more aggressive with peers, and had more ambivalent relationships with their caregivers than those from comparison families. Regression analyses showed that emotional abuse of the mother and mother's self-esteem were the most significant predictors of the child's adjustment and social behavior.

INTRODUCTION

School-age children of battered women are at-risk for higher rates of both internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, interpersonal anxiety, difficulties in school, and lower self-esteem than children raised in nonviolent families (Fantuzzo & Lindquist, 1989; Graham-Bermann, 1996). Some exhibit symptoms consistent with the post-traumatic stress found in adult survivors of war (Graham-Bermann & Levendosky, 1996). However, relatively little is known about the impact of domestic violence on preschoolers and infants. One crucial task for the preschool-age child is the development of appropriate and successful social relationships, as children learn to resolve problems and to regulate emotions in social interactions during the early childhood years (Eisenberg, Fabes, Bernzweig, Karbon, Poulin, & Hanish, 1993; Izard & Harris, 1995). These relationships are considered essential to long-term adjustment outcomes, including friendship with others, social skills, academic success, and self-esteem. Yet, the child's relationship with both parents as models may be compromised by domestic violence. Further, maternal mental health may be an important mediator of the young child's experience within the home, e.g. recovery from violent episodes. The research on resilience in children living in other deleterious family circumstances has demonstrated that mother's mental health and parenting ability, as two examples, can protect children against some otherwise expected negative outcomes (Masten & Coatsworth, 1995; Sameroff & Seifer, 1990). The present study represents a preliminary evaluation of the social interaction and emotional adjustment of young children exposed to domestic violence. In addition, this study contextualizes the physical abuse by including assessments of the emotional abuse of the mother, maternal mental health, and parenting style.

AIMS

- To evaluate the emotional adjustment of preschool-age children exposed to domestic violence.

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- To contextualize the domestic violence by including assessments of the emotional abuse of the mother, maternal mental health, & parenting style.
- To assess the quality of the child's emotion expression and social interactions with peers and caregivers, relative to a comparison sample.
- To analyze variance in the quality of children's social relationships using domestic violence, mother's mental health, and parenting efficacy.

Demographic Characteristics of Two Family Groups

	Domestic Violence(n=21)	Comparison (n=25)
	M SD	M SD
Child age	3.86 (.73)	3.84 (.55)
Child sex	57% male	40% male
Family Size	4.33 (1.28)	4.04 (1.37)
Ethnicity	52% minority	57% minority
Mother's Age	30.10 (5.22)	26.92 (4.41)*a
Income/mo	$958	$933
Mother Ed	48%>HS	68%>HS*b

------ *a t=2.19*, p<.05, *b Chi sq=11.20*, p<.05

MEASURES

Child Behavior & Social Interaction- Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1989), Code for Observations of Social Behavior (Graham-Bermann, 1995): The free play of each child in a small group setting was evaluated for sixty minutes by two reliable observers on three separate occasions. Four qualities of social interaction were rated with a 37 item scale using a 1-5 format.

	# items	Interrater reliability	
Emotion Expression	11	.66	p<.001
Peer Interaction	14	.67	p<.001
Child-caregiver Interaction	8	.68	p<.001
Observer Countertranference	4	.64	p<.001

Domestic Violence & Mother's Measures- Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979), Psychological Maltreatment of Women (Marshall, 1982), Beck Depression Inventory, Self-Esteem Scale (Coopersmith, 1993),Parenting Styles (Sameroff, Thomas, & Barrett, 1990).

Table 1

Mean Violence and Abuse Frequencies (Events Per Year), Maternal Mental Health Scores, Child Adjustment Scores, and their Differences

	Violence	Comparison	Difference
	M SD	M SD	
Emotional Abuse	79.10 (53.14)	2.38 (5.10)	t= 7.20***
Physical Violence	19.92 (23.55)	.07 (.22)	t= 4.23***
Mother Depression	15.29 (11.67)	29.60 (6.30)	t=-5.04***
Mother Self-Esteem	21.67 (2.08)	23.20 (1.76)	t=-2.71**
CBCL: Internalizing	10.19 (8.12)	4.16 (2.54)	t= 3.52**
% Clinical range	33%	0%	Chi Sq=9.83**
CBCL: Externalizing	19.38 (11.05)	9.60 (6.98)	t= 3.51***
% Clinical range	43%	20%	Chi Sq=2.82

Chi Sq=Chi Square, **p<.01, ***p<.001.

Table 2
Differences in Mean Ratings of Observed Child Emotional and Social Interaction for two Groups

	Violence		Comparison		Difference
	M	SD	M	SD	t-test
Emotion Expression					
sadness	1.84	(.72)	1.16	(.26)	4.12***
anger	2.19	(1.12)	1.09	(.26)	4.43***
depression	1.63	(.60)	1.07	(.17)	4.24***
worry	1.46	(.83)	1.04	(.05)	2.30*
frustration	2.14	(.99)	1.23	(.28)	4.12***
appropriate	3.22	(.64)	3.71	(.67)	-2.50*
negativity	2.86	(1.02)	2.07	(.57)	3.05**
nsd expression of positive emotions, e.g. happiness or silliness					
subscale total	25.35	(4.16)	20.52	(2.48)	4.80***
Peer Interaction					
aggressive play	2.13	(.89)	1.45	(.66)	2.95***
violence	1.56	(1.03)	1.07	(.20)	2.20*
rejected	1.07	(.14)	1.20	(.22)	-2.53*
withdrawal	2.37	(.88)	1.61	(.73)	3.11***
verbal abuse	1.82	(1.08)	1.09	(.24)	3.23*
nsd mutual play, cooperative play, sharing, taking turns, having conflict, join play					
subscale total	29.39	(5.27)	26.81	(3.37)	1.24
Child-Caregiver Interaction					
joining with	3.33	(.96)	2.87	(.47)	2.12*
playing with	3.45	(.95)	2.79	(.45)	3.03**
enjoying	1.99	(.90)	3.09	(.56)	-1.99*
fighting with	1.78	(.95)	1.09	(.21)	3.01***
avoiding	2.06	(1.14)	1.21	(.29)	2.42*
distracted	2.29	(.27)	1.28	(.49)	3.54**
contact with	2.75	(.66)	2.00	(.90)	3.14**
nsd cooperating with the caregiver					
subscale total	19.92	(2.76)	17.00	(1.73)	3.88***
Observer Impressions					
attached to	2.35	(.87)	1.79	(.86)	2.20*
needs help	2.78	(.90)	1.43	(.89)	5.11***
tired watching	2.22	(1.35)	1.08	(.28)	3.81***
nsd liking this child					
subscale total	10.59	(1.95)	7.29	(1.98)	5.66***

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001.

Table 3
Hierarchical Regression Analysis using Domestic Violence, Maternal Mental Health and Parenting Variables to Predict to Child Adjustment (N=46)

	CBCL Internal		CBCL External	
Variable :	SE B	ß	SE B	ß
Step 1 Physical Violence	.26	.41	.28	-.46
Emotional Abuse	.26	.24	.28	.91**
Step 2 Mother's Depression	.12	.19	.13	.17
Self-Esteem	.13	-.34**	.14	-.29*
Step 3 Parenting Efficacy	.13	-.15	.14	-.18

Internal Adj R^2=.37 for step 1, Adj R^2=.46 for step 2, Adj R^2=.47 for step 3.
External Adj R^2=.26 for step 1, Adj R^2=.31 for step 2, Adj R^2=.32 for step 3.

Table 4
Hierarchical Regression Analysis using Domestic Violence, Maternal Mental Health, and Parenting Variables to Predict to Observed Child Behavior

	Emotion Expression		Child w Caregiver		Observer Impression	
Variable :	SE B	ß	SE B	ß	SE B	ß
Step 1						
Physical Violence	.02	-.26	.02	-.30	.02	-.24
Emotional Abuse	.01	.77**	.01	.76**	.01	.73**
Step 2						
Mother's Depression	.01	.38**	.01	.27	.01	.21
Self-Esteem	.07	-.13	.08	-.03	.07	-.08
Step 3						
Parenting Efficacy	.28	-.07	.34	.06	.31	-.17

Emotion Adj R2=.27 for step 1, Adj R2=.40 for step 2, Adj R2=.39 for step 3.
Child Adj R2=.26 for step 1, Adj R2=.28 for step 2, Adj R2=.26 for step 3.
Observer Adj R2=.24 for step 1, Adj R2=.26 for step 2, Adj R2=.26 for step 3.

CONCLUSIONS

1 Young children exposed to domestic violence had higher rates of both internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems than did children from similar but nonviolent families.

2 The battered women's children had more difficulties in social interaction with peers. That is, they exhibited significantly more negative affect, responded less appropriately to situations, and were more aggressive with peers than those from nonviolent families.

3 However, they were no less happy in play than their peers and were equally likely to engage in mutual play, cooperative play, sharing and taking turns, and joining in play with others.

4 Observations of the interpersonal interactions of the child with the caregiver showed that the children who witnessed violence had more ambivalent relationships with caregivers, including both more positive and more negative contact with the caregiver.

5 Emotional abuse of the mother and mother's mental health were the most significant predictors of the child's adjustment and social behavior.